Flood of memories

Son honors father’s life with museum

When Hutch Harnsberger was a boy, he saw what was probably the most devastating flood ever.

Hutch, a resident of Greenbrae, died last April, but his son Steve of San Anselmo has honored his father’s memories by bringing that flood to world attention. Late last month, he opened a museum in Qiaoyou City, China, where the flood took place in 1931, inundating 10,000 square miles of nearby farmland — 70,000 square miles in all of China — and ultimately killing 3.7 million people in the Huai River region and in the Yangtze and Yellow River valleys.

Steve Harnsberger gave the museum a remarkable trove of photographs, documents and letters telling the story of that catastrophe, which seemed overshadowed by the headlines of other events: the Depression, Japan’s invasion of China, a civil war between the Communists and Chiang Kai-Shek.

Hutch wanted it remembered. As much as anything, he wanted to honor his father, a Presbyterian missionary in the Jiangxi Province who vowed to rebuild the dikes that were breached on Qiaoyou Lake, near Taizhou, where the family lived.

“Lyt” (Thomas Lyttleton) Harnsberger obtained funds from the China Foreign Famine Relief Commission in Shanghai and teamed with a Chinese engineer to build what a government report called the best of all the rebuilt dikes. Some 1,000 dikes

See Flood, page B2

1931: This aerial photo by Charles Lindbergh in September 1931 shows the flooding and devastation in China that covered an area larger than Massachusetts. More than 3.7 million people died in the flooding. The family of missionary Thomas Harnsberger lived on a houseboat (top photo) during the flooding. His son Hutch learned to swim from the boat. Hutch’s son Steve has built a museum in China in honor of his grandfather’s rebuilding efforts after the flooding.

1931: (bottom left) A photo courtesy of Steve Harnsberger.
Across Marin

FLOOD: Museum in China to remember father

From page B1

had been breached and later rebuilt on the Huai, Yellow and Yangtze rivers.

Steve Harnsberger, a technology business executive at Sonic Solutions in Novato, picked up his father’s research and has pushed it to new heights. He launched a museum, participated in a documentary on the flood for CCTV in China, wrote the script for an English-language documentary and is working on a book of flood photos, many of which were taken from the air in 1931 by aviator Charles Lindbergh.

Lindbergh and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, flew in an open cockpit plane over the flood during their trailbreaking flight from Canada, over the Arctic Ocean to China. Anne described their view of the flood in her book, “North to the Orient.”

As they flew along the Grand Canal, which connects Souzhou to Beijing, “We became aware of a number of ‘lakes’ which constantly increased until finally they gave the impression of one big lake, enormous, stretching as far as we could see. I realized with a shock that this was not a ‘lake,’ it was all flood... Deep and wide, horribly still and permanent, it looked as though it had always been there and would always stay.”

The Lindberghs landed in Nanjing, and offered whatever help they could give. They were enlisted to carry medical supplies to stricken towns. On one such mission, Lindbergh’s plane was set upon by thousands of villagers in sampans, who very nearly sank his plane trying to clamber aboard in search of food. Hutch left China a few years after the floods, after his father and local crews had repaired the dikes and the Harnsberger family had moved from Taizhou to Shanghai. They moved to Richmond, Va., in 1999.

Hutch returned to China for the first time in 1989. He went again with family members in 2001, after the Chinese government retracted its vilification of the thousands of foreign missionaries who had established hospitals and schools throughout China. The missionaries were thrown out of the country when the Communists took over.

The Harnsbergers were in China again in 2002, when Hutch was invited to speak at the 100th anniversary of the Hospital of Mercy and Love in Huai’An, north of Taizhou on the Grand Canal, where missionaries introduced China to western medicine. The hospital had been directed by Hutch’s grandfather James Baker Woods (and later by Nelson Bell, father-in-law of evangelist Billy Graham).

Steve went to China with his daughter Sarah in December for the museum opening — and came back to San Anselmo to find the basement of his home on Woodland Avenue inches deep in floodwaters.

He smiles at the coincidence and allows that what happened in San Anselmo was “a modern catastrophe. But then you look at what happened in China in 1931 and your jaw drops.”

The Gaoyou Lake flood was always a family story, which he suspects he had discounted until — with the help of a Nanjing friend, Shu Xiaojuan, who now lives in his San Anselmo home and is getting an MBA at San Francisco State University — they unearthed records and photos in the Nanjing government archives.

Eight weeks of rain preceded the flood, which topped the banks of a levee surrounding Gaoyou Lake, watershed of the Huai River and next to the Grand Canal. Lands around the lake were 20 feet higher than the surrounding plain, which stretched all the way to the Yellow Sea.

On Aug. 25, 1931, a typhoon hit, and the spill began. “Ten thousand people were washed away instantly,” Harnsberger said. Many more died of disease, starvation and exposure.

Photos show six major ruptures in the levee.

Rebuilding the Gaoyou levees was painstaking and — to say the least — labor intensive. During the project, Hutch and his family lived aboard the family houseboat near the site. Part of Lyt’s responsibility was to distribute thousands of tons of grain, provided by the United States on long-term loan to stave off famine.

Earth for the dikes was delivered by sampan “one basket at a time,” Harnsberger said. It was pounded and compacted into place by 200-pound limestone stones, heaved into the air by teams of workers who labored “all day long, in terrible heat and cold.”

Contact Beth Ashley via e-mail at bashley@marinij.com